

'A Real Southern Populist'

Ramsey Clark, New Lion Will He Be President or a

By JACK NEWFIELD

AT FIRST I wasn't very enthusiastic about writing a piece on Ramsey Clark. He seemed to me like an undefined figure in the middle distance. And besides, my head was in another place.

I had made a promise to myself a few months before to write more about specific injustices and insurgent movements. I didn't want to write about personalities, especially liberal political personalities.

Meanwhile, out of curiosity, not yet consciously working on the assignment, I began to ask my friends active in liberal politics what they happened to think about this guy Ramsey Clark.

These were the insiders, the activists who will be there in New Hampshire in 1972, and they all liked Ramsey Clark very much.

"He's terrific," David Mixner, one of the founders of the Vietnam Moratorium, told me. "He really seems like a principled guy who will stand up and take a risk for things he believes in."

Marion Wright Edelman, the poor people's tribune in Washington, said, "Ramsey is a beautiful man." Marion's husband, Peter Edelman, who was Robert Kennedy's legislative assistant, said, "Ramsey is my first choice for President in 1972. He's tough and he has integrity. He's a real Southern populist."

'Best Liberal'

Roger Wilkins, who worked under Clark in the Justice Department, said simply, "Ramsey Clark is the best liberal hope in the country. He's the best guy I know."

Could this Texan, this ex-Marine, this son of a conser-



Ramsey Clark

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vative attorney general and a strict-constructionist justice of the Supreme Court, this member of Lyndon Johnson's Cabinet, become a new white hope, a wise Southern voice for freedom, the same way Senator Fulbright has been an oddly accented voice for peace?

I decided to research Clark's record as attorney general, and to find out just what he has been doing since he moved part-time to New York and joined the Paul, Weiss, Goldberg, etc., law firm last July.

Although responsible for the conspiracy indictment of Rev. Coffin and Dr. Spock, Clark's record on issues turned out to be good otherwise. (Some people said he was a weak administrator).

He was the first AG to oppose capital punishment while in office. He opposed preventive detention. He testified against wiretapping.

In a speech in North Carolina, he criticized Mayor Daley's "shoot to kill" order to the Chicago police. ("A reverence for life is the sure way to reducing violent death. There are few acts more likely to cause guerilla warfare in our cities and division and hatred among our people than to encourage police to shoot looters . . . how many dead 12-year-old boys will it take for us to learn this simple lesson?")

Pressure Resisted

He obtained a legal permit for the demonstrators at that doomed Shantytown of the poor called Resurrection City. He refused to indict the organizers of the demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic Convention, and despite pressure from the White House and Mayor Daley, he recommended that nine Chicago policemen be indicted.

When three black college students were killed by state highway patrolmen at Orangeburg, S. C., in February of 1968, and a local white grand jury refused to indict any of them, Clark entered the case and pressed federal prosecution of nine policemen for murder. (They were acquitted). He angered J. Edgar Hoover by vetoing bugs and wiretaps on Martin Luther King; and he angered important congressmen by pushing for strong gun-control legislation.

Since he joined Paul, Weiss,

he has attempted to resury for the defense at the Chicago conspiracy trial. He has joined the citizen's commission that is investigating the police attacks on the Black Panthers, and has really worked at it. He became honorary chairman of the Committee to save our Constitution, which is trying to force a

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Supreme Court test of the constitutionality of the war in Indochina. He has spoken, written and testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee in behalf of lowering the voting age to 18. He is currently representing the Alaskan native population — Aleutian Islanders, Eskimos and Indians — in their land claims against the Federal Government. He has given fund-raising parties and campaigned for anti-war candidates. He has taught a course in law at Howard University called "Law as an Effective Instrument of Social Change."

Modest Tastes

Ramsey Clark is by tem-

perament a modest and tasteful man. Although he grew up in the raunchy rodeo of Texas politics with LBJ, Sam Rayburn, and his father, Tom Clark, he doesn't seem to be a political animal at all. He seems more like a professor or a country preacher. Or a strong-silent sheriff like Gary Cooper. He doesn't seem to have the politician's primitive ego lust for power, or the politician's need for self-promotion, or even the politician's preoccupation with the appearance of things.

He wouldn't even defend himself against the attacks by Richard Nixon during the 1968 campaign that distorted his record. Ramsey Clark, Nixon implied, was soft on crime, just as Helen Gahagan Douglas had been soft on Communism in 1950.

The attack quickly became a dominant motif of the whole Nixon campaign.

When I asked Roger Wilkins why Clark didn't hit back harder at Nixon during that campaign period, he replied, "Ramsey was naive. He thought that because Nixon's attacks were based on distortions of the record, the media would point that out. But I think that experience taught him a lesson. He's much less diffident now. He's much more willing to fight now."

On the Road

Now Ramsey Clark is out of power, and he is watching a new attorney general, a former municipal bonds lawyer who was Richard Nixon's campaign manager and who thought up the campaign attacks against him for being soft on crime. He is watching this new and very political at-

INQUIRER - 8/2/70

of the Liberals: Super-Sheriff?

torney general fire liberal lawyers from the Civil Rights Division, support men like Harrold Carswell and Clement Haynsworth for the Supreme Court, and abort plans for school desegregation.

He is watching this new attorney general, who believes in, and executed, the very real Southern strategy, hire as his top deputies Barry Goldwater's former campaign manager (Richard Kleindienst) and a conservative Texas politician who was recommended by Sen. John Tower (Will Wilson). And now Ramsey Clark fears that his successors are beginning to tune up the long-dormant machinery of McCarthyism.

Mitchell and his crew have been in power for 18 months and the hard evidence of repression piles up. The conspiracy indictment and trial of

the Chicago eight, after Clark concluded there was no evidence to justify any prosecution. ("The indictment of Bobby Seale was a scandal"). The subpoenas of media files and notebooks. The whole panoply of bugs, wiretaps, dossiers and police agents. The sudden 5 A.M. police raids on the homes of Black Panthers, like the one in Chicago that killed Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. These are the tactics and mood of 1953. And Ramsey Clark, private citizen, watches it all grow out of the big office on the fifth floor of the justice department that he once occupied.

So now, instead of making a lot of money by representing big corporate clients, instead of getting some lucrative consulting hustle, Ramsey Clark is committed, and he travels all around the country making speeches with his slow Texas twang in defense of such unpopular things as the Bill of Rights and American college students.

'Moral Crusade'

One afternoon I flew to Washington and interviewed Clark for several hours in the Paul, Weiss, Goldberg law offices on K street. In his shirtsleeves, playing nervously with a black-and-red grape strike button, Clark answered my first question — about

what his childhood was like.

"I grew up in Texas. I was born in Dallas. My family moved to Washington when I was 9 years old. My father was sworn in as attorney general on July 1, 1945, by President Truman. I was 17 then, and I had just joined the Marines. I had quit high school to go into the Marines..."

"Why the Marines?" I asked.

"Why did 17-year-old kids in Watts join in the riot? It seemed like where the action was. It seemed like a great moral crusade. I didn't want to go to West Point because I had a prejudice against being an officer."

After leaving the Marines, Clark picked up three degrees in four years — a B.A. in history at the University of Texas and an M.A. and law degree at the University of Chicago, all between February of 1947 and December of 1950.

'Frightened People'

I asked Clark how much of a threat he saw to liberty today. Could he, for example, envisage a military takeover in this country in the next few years?

He leaned back in his chair, paused for a long time, and began to answer very deliberately.

"Oh, I suppose there are some people in the government who have those instincts. There are some very frightened and authoritarian people over there who could react to circumstances that way if the kids went wild. It could happen here."

"But I don't think those fellows in Justice now are very competent, or efficient. They just rush around from one fire to the next. They have no plan or vision about the whole thing. Kleindienst, Wilson, Mitchell, all of them put together, couldn't have an intelligent five-minute conversa-

tion about the latest developments in electronic bugging devices. They're not really smart enough to do anything dangerous... Kleindienst is just a guy who likes to win. It doesn't matter much to him what he wins, just so long as he wins... The more serious problem is that all those fellows are so political. They're not professional. They're very ambitious, and there is that Southern strategy, which does affect things like desegregation and judicial nominations."

I pressed him for details of where the impetus for repression comes — who, how, when?

Rumor Mill

"Oh, the bureau FBI (likes to do a lot of bugging (putting a listening device into a room, as opposed to a tap only on the telephone). The bureau sent me a memo just two days before Dr. King was assassinated asking permission to bug his home and office in connection with the poor peo-



Thomas C. Clark

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ple's campaign... the bureau wanted me to bug the fellows planning the demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic Convention, but I said no... I remember in August of 1967, when Spiro Agnew was governor of Maryland, he said that he had evidence that the same people started the riots in Newark and Detroit. So I called him up, and he didn't have any evidence. — It was the same with Mayor Daley. He said the people were coming to Chicago in 1968 to assassinate the candidates. There was no evidence of that. It was just rumors in police circles, stuff from informants. But a lot of police informants are mentally unbalanced people. The rumor mill among law enforcement agencies is immense... a lot of this surveillance gets silly; at one point there were agents from six different agencies following Rap Brown. His mother used to invite them all in for breakfast when they were waiting outside."

Did Clark think there was a systematic plan in the Justice Department to eliminate Black Panthers?

'Immoral' Law

"The way it really works is very complicated. It's not so simple as a directive to get the Panthers. It's a mood, a tone, a license. The Justice Department sets a tone toward dissent, toward the Panthers. They circulate profiles of the leaders to the local police. There's a police raid in one city, and then another city gets the idea by example... in Seattle, it was the Treasury Department, not the Justice Department, that asked the mayor to raid the Panther headquarters... The real root of the problem is the no-knock law that lets the police come in so easily. The best thing the law can do is provide moral leadership. The law can't act immorally. But in fact the law acts immorally constantly. The no-knock law is immoral. That's the problem."

The only blot on Clark's record as attorney general, in my view, is his prosecution of Dr. Spock.

I asked Clark if he "regretted" his indictment of Spock, Coffin and the others.

"I do regret the conspiracy aspect of that case," Clark replied. "I regret the conspiracy aspect of all cases I was involved in because our whole

body of conspiracy laws is unjust and unfair.

"But Spock and Coffin wanted to test the law, so we had to face up to it... I feel that we crippled and hurt a good many people with our draft prosecutions. Some of the draft resisters were among the best and most sensitive young men in the country. But the law has to proceed with integrity... but after the conviction I did urge, through the U.S. attorney, that there be no jail sentences in the Spock case."

Talk of 1972

There is beginning to swirl around 42-year-old Ramsey Clark the intoxicating talk that he might try to run for President in 1972. Two citizens' committees promoting his candidacy have already been started, one in Boston and the other in Raleigh, N.C. Clark, somewhat self-consciously, keeps in his desk one blue-and-white "Ramsey Clark for President in 1972" bumper sticker sent to him by organizers of the Raleigh group.

When I asked a wise lady journalist in Washington what she made of the Clark for president idea, she replied, "it would be nice if we had a country good enough to elect Ramsey as President. But we don't."

Another, more cynical, Washington writer said, "Are you crazy? Ramsey has no base in any state party in the country. He's never run for office in his life. He's not even political! He has no money and no charisma. And Nixon has smeared him as a coddler of criminals."

But a liberal Democratic congressman told me, "It's possible. There's a total vacuum at the top of the party now. I think what the country is really looking for is a strong, quiet leader, someone new, someone with integrity. And Ramsey's Texas accent and folksy style should give him some credibility in Middle America."

In April, Clark appeared with his father on "Meet the Press", and panelist Carl Rowan asked him, "Do you have any presidential ambitions?"

Clark, in his best Gary Cooper-style, answered with a terse "no."

'Shuffling Around'

But about a month later, a print journalist asked Clark, "What is your future in national politics?"

This time Clark replied, "As you know, I haven't had a post in national politics. I started out as a lawyer and became a bureaucrat, and now I'm just shuffling around. No one can tell, least of all me, where I'm headed. I AM concerned. I think there are several sources of real power in this country and, happily, I think political power is one of them."

When I asked Clark about the thought of running for President, he answered:

"Oh, I can't plan anything about that. What I feel is that there have to be some of us who are willing to use up all our power fighting for change. That's where I think I might be of some help. I know I have too many handicaps as a candidate. I'm more liberal than I appear to be. I'm not good at indirection. So many of my positions are not popular. So I just work for change, and see what happens. I think maybe someone who is better than me at indirection, but who believes in the same things, should carry the ball for our side."

Compared to the people one normally meets cruising the corridors of power, Ramsey Clark is just an exceptionally decent human being. He would be exceptional among shoe salesmen or concert violinists. Among politicians he is a Saint Francis.

Over the seasons I have met, and reported on, and gotten to know, many upwardly mobile politicians and the hungry sharks who swim in their wake. They are, general-

ly speaking, a wormy lot.

Special Virtues

Most of them are more turned on by money and status than by suffering or war. Most of them are expert at deceit and evasion in order to cover up their real beliefs. Most of them are terrified of losing an election because they are otherwise unemployable, so they let the latest public opinion poll be the puppeteer of their conscience. Most of them don't even know who they are, and have no interior life.

A lot of them are plain corrupt and without any idea of what is actually happening in the country. There is something unfortunately endemic to the environment of politics that rewards the worst aspects of human nature. It is only after you have spent an enormous amount of time around political people that you can appreciate the special virtues of a Ramsey Clark.

He tells the truth. He is neither for sale nor an egomaniac. His motives are what they seem. He has the courage to take unpopular positions and stick to them. And he really cares about life's casualties and victims, because he has the novelist's capacity to imagine the nature of their daily lives.

What Destiny?

The President thing now hovers over Clark like a thin vapor. In recent days I've talked to law professors and OEO employees and delegates to the NAACP convention who all said they would quit their jobs to work for him. I just don't know if he could raise the money and manipulate the media and create the national constituency. Maybe his own notion that he should use up his power in good causes makes sense.

Ramsey Clark is something special. I believe that character is more important than politics, and men with Clark's character almost never reach his level of political authority.

Maybe the President thing is unrealistic. Maybe Ramsey Clark's fate is to play the role of Ed Murrow or Eleanor Roosevelt to the new McCarthy. Maybe his destiny is to be our Gary Cooper, a good Texas lawman quietly preparing for his High Noon with the big bad bully John Mitchell, to protect the young, the poor and the black.

And maybe such a tall sheriff for justice is what this country needs, even more than it needs another liberal politician running for President.